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# PROOF THEY WERE THERE

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A Thesis

Presented To

Eastern Washington University

Cheney, Washington

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

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By

Holly Lavecchia

Spring 2016

Thesis of Holly Lavecchia Approved by

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## MASTER'S THESIS

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## On Being a Professional Friend

When I was hired as a para, I knew almost nothing about the job. I knew I'd be working in a North Dakota high school, in the Special Education department, and that I'd have vision insurance for the first time. My interview had focused on my comfort level with kids, but even the job description was too ambiguous to squeeze any clues from it—when I read that I would *Assist special education teachers in routine classroom operation*, I had no idea that it meant I would help an Algebra teacher explain to a student, in the middle of a lesson on polynomials, that he shouldn't let his friend tattoo him with blue ink and a sewing needle ever again.

I didn't understand that teachers would routinely send me to walk miles around the school, cursing my high-heeled boots, searching for kids who weren't in class or even in the building. I had no way of knowing that I'd help a student hold a power sander in shop because he only had four fingers, or that in Foods class I would have to moderate the bickering among my group of four students, each with a different intellectual disability—that I would beg them to just take turns with the damn spatula.

I didn't know that to *Demonstrate initiative and creativity with students and their program* meant that it would fall on me to teach an aggressively friendly, socially oblivious ninth-grade boy to stop touching his female classmates' earrings, or their hair, or *my* hair, just because he thought it was pretty. Every day I tried a new way to combat this behavior. Sometimes I would calmly explain the sacredness of personal space. Sometimes I'd accidentally start into a monologue about why compliments can make women feel uncomfortable, and how we are not required to say thank you.

When I was a para two years ago, there were 140 kids who received services from the Special Ed department. Almost all of them were enrolled in mainstream classes and looked outwardly “normal,”

except for their files, which identified students as ED (emotionally disturbed) or LD (learning-disabled). Most had their own unique and baffling combo of invisible obstacles. Some were known as “that disruptive kid.” Many had disengaged parents. Half would drop out before graduation.

Para is Greek for “beside.” In order to help students, paras were encouraged to cajole, pester, befriend, challenge, and sometimes trick them into doing schoolwork. Often, those students lacked the muscle memory of success, and we were there to help them feel it for the first time. For many of our kids, school was a dark place, and we were there to shed light into the hopelessness, to advocate for them. We were there to give them back some dignity by whatever means we could.

The thing about the title, “paraprofessional,” is that it’s too clunky to say. Everyone just called us paras—the “professional” was always dropped.

On my first day as a para, I had no idea that to *Exhibit understanding of student’s areas of strengths and weaknesses* meant I would spend my school year trying to negotiate the blur between teacher and friend, trying to get close to the students I worked alongside so I could comprehend the depth of their good and their bad, while attempting to remain professional. I didn’t know that I’d have a



favorite kid—Allen—and that I would come to feel like no one understood the nuances of his strengths and weaknesses the way I did, not even him.

On Wednesdays, students were required to read for the first fifteen minutes of each class—just about any book they wanted. Wednesdays always caught Allen by surprise; he never showed up to first hour with a book. Every week I watched him reach blindly into the cabinet of extra paperbacks above his computer and begin reading whichever book he touched first. For a couple of weeks he read Steinbeck's *The Pearl* and then *Of Mice and Men*. Those fifteen minutes every Wednesday were the only times I saw Allen be still and focused without constant redirection. Those fifteen minutes were what first tipped me off about his intelligence.

Allen loved to read. He often mispronounced words because he'd read them but never heard them spoken aloud. He told me his favorite author was Dean Koontz, and when he'd read *Watchers* and *Shadowfires*, he had decided to be a genetic engineer someday. He loved hip-hop, especially, as he said, "high-concept songs full of storytelling." During a digression from physical science homework, we discussed our favorite words. He had to explain to me what "swagger" was.

Everything about Allen was cartoonish—his huge gestures, his breathless stories, and his floof of blonde hair. He told me he was writing a novella during seventh hour, and referred to my fellow para, Margo, as his co-author. He was creative and bright. But without a para attending every class with him, he would fail each one.

I never got to see students' files, or hear which label they were stamped with. I assumed that the teachers decided it wasn't a para's place to know, which was frustrating at the beginning. I thought if I knew the specifics of their disadvantages, I could better assist my students. Midway through the year, a teacher casually mentioned to me that Allen was "on the spectrum." And sure, knowing that he had some degree of autism explained why he didn't look at me while we were talking, and why his humor never landed right with his peers. But the diagnosis didn't satisfy me as I thought it would—by then he was a full person in my mind, and imagining that he existed somewhere on a figurative, infinite spectrum of a complicated disability did nothing to help me help him succeed.

For the first half of the year, I went to ninth grade Health with Allen. I sat next to him and made sure he was taking notes during lectures on blood alcohol content or the menstrual cycle. For the test on the male and female reproductive systems, I quizzed him for an hour,

pointing to the unmarked diagrams. When we got to labia majora and labia minora, he made a joke about menorahs. It was amusing the first time.

For the second half of the year, we went to World Cultures together. For his final project, he chose Uruguay or Paraguay—I don't remember which country he picked because he could never remember which country he'd picked. My largest responsibility to Allen was to serve as his memory. In study hall, the teacher would ask what homework he had been assigned ten minutes earlier in algebra, and he would say, "I don't know." I realized quickly that this was a genuine response; he seemed to have no recall. When prompted with details about the worksheet—word problems about selling candy, he would say, "Ohhhhhh yeah," and sometimes raise his index finger in the air. But the homework had vanished forever.

His "I don't knows" exasperated teachers. They had heard the line countless times from countless others. That was the one disadvantage of looking like a "normal" kid: teachers didn't believe that Allen's struggles were legitimate. They assumed stubbornness, apathy, day-dreaming, lack of work ethic. I once heard a male teacher from my department yelling at Allen in front of the other study hall students.

“How can you not remember where it is?” Allen hated going to that study hall. I didn’t blame him.

Sometimes during first hour, in order to relieve some tension from our strenuous dealings in math or science, I would speak to Allen in a silly accent that’s somewhere between the Grinch and Sean Connery. He would adopt it right away and we would have whole conversations like that. One morning we danced wildly, lip-syncing to Jon Bon Jovi’s “It’s my Life.” Another time, he asked me what my favorite music was, and he played a YouTube video of a Christian song I mentioned; he said he kind of liked it.

Allen checked out a library book early in the year, and I spent months reminding him to bring it back, while the librarian sent us increasingly threatening pieces of paper with his name highlighted in red. What I didn’t know at the time was that Allen was in and out of foster care, and sometimes stayed with an uncle or his friend Cooper. The book had been lost in the shuffle. When he mentioned he would get to spend a weekend with his mom, it felt like he’d told me a secret—like a breakthrough in our relationship, but I tried not to make a big deal about the news or his sharing it with me. I told him I hoped they had a fun time.

The last day of the quarter was the deadline for returning library books. I went down the hall to the library with Allen, and watched as he removed \$15 from his wallet—all the cash he had—and handed it to the librarian to replace the missing book. I realized a moment too late that I would have liked to pay the fee for him. For the rest of the day I was bothered that I hadn't.

I knew Allen wasn't lying about not remembering things; I could tell he had no agenda. He wasn't particularly charismatic, and unlike other students who were openly manipulative or entitled, Allen seemed completely unguarded. It was part of the reason I liked him so much.

Outside of my professional life, when I care about someone, I tell them. I vocalize all my feelings. I show affection and bestow plentiful hugs and words of affirmation. Yet, even though I spent more time with Allen than with anyone else in my life at the time, my job required me to keep a professional distance. I never knew what size the distance should be, but it felt oppressive nonetheless.

Allen's fifteenth birthday seemed like a perfect excuse to tell him how much I liked him. First hour, I suggested that everyone in our five-person class give him a compliment for his birthday. Allen sprang up from his chair, trying not to smile. "Yes do that! What a brilliant idea!" he said, and began to pace and tap his fingers together in anticipation.

The teacher said she was happy with his progress. When it was my turn I told him, “You’re really funny and fun to work with, and you’re just an all-around good guy.” He fanned his face with his hand and mimed blinking back tears.

The first Facebook friend request I received from Allen, I ignored. But the next day when he mentioned it loudly in class, I was embarrassed. I told him I was flattered, but A) my online presence is really not that interesting and B) for me to be linked to a student on social media would probably be inappropriate. Later he shouted to me in a crowded hallway: “Accept my friend request, Holly!” I couldn’t tell if he was trying to seem teasing or badgering. I couldn’t tell if he was hurt.

I would never have accepted his request while I was working at the high school; I cringed imagining him clicking through all of my photos online, or reading my old posts about being young, dumb, and hungover. Allen continued to ask me why I wouldn’t accept his friend request, and his refusal to let it go made me increasingly uncomfortable. A friend of mine, a fellow para, in the middle of her own mental health upheaval, had been fired that spring and later arrested for showing naked pictures of herself to a student. Seeing the concept of professionalism so willfully discarded shook our department and put

me on edge. On the days when Allen and I goofed around enough to make me forget I was at work, I questioned my own professionalism. Some days I caught myself talking to him like he was one of my younger brothers, who are nine and ten years younger than me, barely older than Allen. I cared about him, probably too much.

My last day of work was Allen's last day of ninth grade. Six months later I went back for a visit, carrying a bag of candy to hand out. I found a former colleague and she told me that Allen was gone that day. She added, with a sigh, "He's different this year." In the next brief silence, I waited for her to say more, dying to know what she meant by *different*. Was he having a hard time with geometry? Had he gotten into drugs like so many others? And then I saw in her face that I was no longer entitled to such information.

Sometimes when Allen crosses my mind, I go online to see what I can find out about him. We're still not Facebook friends, but I'm able to click through all of his photos. His hair is longer. He quotes Nietzsche. He uses the word "nigga" and has discovered selfies. He has a girlfriend now and she likes all of his posts, for which I'm grateful. He deserves to have someone cheering him on.

Peeking at his Facebook profile makes me feel simultaneously better and worse. I have details but they don't add up to a picture of

how school is going, whether he lives with his mom, or works a fast food job after school. I also feel like I'm invading his privacy, like a voyeur, creepy and inappropriate, like I still care more than I should.

When I was a para, my job was to exist alongside the students, to figure out what they were capable of and help them when they needed me. My job was to earn a kid's trust, build a relationship, a friendship even, and then attempt to leave it in the parking lot on the way to my car at 3:30.

I understand now, that once you've witnessed the depths of someone's good and bad, defended them when they're misunderstood, and lip-synced Jon Bon Jovi together, there's no coming back from that.



## Evidence of Magic

When I would find birds our cats had killed, there was often no sign of a struggle. They didn't look notably mangled or chewed on. Their intestines weren't flat and stringy alongside them. They were whole, unblinking birds, usually grey or brown.

Back when I still scoured our gravel driveway, seeking rocks for my collection, I felt it was my obligation to give those birds their burial rites. The cats were my responsibility, and so was their carnage.

The ground of our country yard was solid and I didn't have tools for digging. So laying a bird to rest meant tugging handfuls of grass from the ground and covering the bird like a tiny green burial mound, which I somehow failed to realize the mower would ravage days later.

I was maybe seven, and thought all wild animals were magic—pristine, wise, completely untouchable—and the closest I could get to the magic was little limp bodies abandoned by overfed cats. So when I noticed, from the top of our swing set, three barely blue eggs in a nest, in a short spindly tree nearby, I couldn't help myself. I dragged a plastic chair from our porch, climbed up, and, standing on my tiptoes, snatched the eggs. I put them in an ice cream pail with grass for a cushion and hurried to find someone to show them to. I think my grandma was the one who dealt the blow. She told me that the babies would not hatch without their mama bird sitting on them. I could replace the eggs, but now that they smelled like me, the mama would never come back.

Ornithologists can't actually agree on whether birds have a keen sense of smell or not. But that day, the news that my scent was dangerous sunk hard in my stomach. I imagined my dumb intrusion turning the chicks cold and hard inside their shells. And I'm not sure why I did it, but in the golden hour before sunset that day, I smashed those eggs.

The yellow of the yolks was fluorescent. The whites were slimier than I had expected, and they glistened on the tree where I'd splattered

them. I noticed some egg dribbling down my wrist, and thought, horrified, *Why did you do that?*

Two decades later, I still don't know why. Maybe it was rebellion against nature's injustice, or against a chilling, callous model of motherhood. Maybe it was just a tantrum. Maybe I smashed them to destroy the evidence that I had spoiled something innocent and perfect. I've never been able to shake the shame of it, like a sin committed against my own body, but I've forgiven other people for making magic go out of the world.

For hundreds of years, an Elm tree towered over my family's land. It was the tallest tree I had ever seen, and I always imagined it looking down at us in that tender way nursing home residents regard preschoolers. When its mammoth branches started to fall, we knew it was sick with Dutch Elm Disease. After what felt like ten years, but may have only been one, my uncle finally felled the skeleton. In a photograph from that day, six of us stand on the stump. You can tell I've been crying.

Not long ago my mom told me we maybe could've saved the tree. There's a tree vaccine for Dutch Elm Disease which apparently my family opted against. It was expensive—thousands of dollars, with no guarantee it would work. I want to blame my mom and my uncle for

the slow death of our Elm tree, and the resulting disenchantment of our yard. But really, I know it wasn't their fault.

One day in fifth grade, my classmate Kaitlyn said suddenly, "maybe we're too old to play monkeys." And as soon as she had said it, it was true. She may have been the one who dictated the day, but it wasn't Kaitlyn's fault we quit playing pretend.

When I caught sight of the eggs from the top of the swing set, I wanted to hold them in my hand. And almost as soon as I touched them—because I touched them—their magic was undone. It was like someone showed me how a card trick was done and the explanation made the whole thing cheap. It was like I'd pried the lid off the mystery, to reveal only an empty box.

A few years ago my parents were moving and my mom and aunt were going through some boxes I'd stored in the basement.

My mom later told me that she'd opened a small box and found blue egg shells wrapped in tissue. Immediately I thought of the day I'd smashed the eggs and remembered that I'd saved one shell, delicately broken in half, because it was too beautiful not to keep. My mom told me that when she unwrapped the tissue, she'd teared up a little and said to her sister, "These were Holly's treasures."

I didn't tell her otherwise. Instead, I grieved with my mom—not for me, exactly, but for a little girl who might have found egg shells already broken in a nest, and kept them as evidence of magic.

## Zits

An inconclusive list of home remedies for acne, which I tried on the advice of wikiHow, Pinterest, Marie Claire, and the YouTube channel of a fashionable teenager from Kansas: egg whites; lemon juice; apple cider vinegar; baking soda; coconut oil; tea tree oil; toothpaste; and honey. I knew to my core that smearing honey on my face was ridiculous. I did it anyway.

Other measures: Biore Pore Strips; birth control pills (several brands); Proactiv (and other as-seen-on-TV acne treatments); benzoyl peroxide (which bleached spots on all my boyfriends' pillow cases); something called Differin Gel; getting more sleep; Retin-A; Spironolactone (which caused my nails to pull away from the nail

beds—a fingernail disorder called onycholysis); erythromycin; clindamycin; tetracycline; doxycycline (which caused my face to sunburn daily); Bare Minerals Foundation; Clinique Acne Solutions; praying; penicillin’s cousin sulphonamide; putting my face over a pot of just-boiled water; Vitamins A, B, D and E; calcium; fish oil; zinc; and a pill supplement called Hair Skin and Nails (which very much looked and smelled like it was made of hair, skin, and nails). I tried cutting gluten, cutting dairy, cutting sugar, praying harder, and purchasing more creams, washes, and scrubs than I could ever recall.

In the fifteen years I have had acne—more than half my lifetime—it has become a part of my identity. Even if I wake up three days in a row without a new zit, even when my mom remarks “Your skin’s looking so clear!” my reaction is frustration. Even if she can’t see it, I know my acne’s still there. In my mind it will always be there.

My mom loves popping pimples. The emergence of my first few pioneer zits delighted her. By age eleven, I knew that if she noticed a fresh whitehead on the soft skin of my face, she would pause, mid-conversation, and say “Are you going to let me get that?” Then she’d chase me down the hallway giggling maniacally; she’d catch up, tackle me, pin me, and, in her words, “Squeeze the goop out of my face” while I flailed and yelled “Mom! Noooo!” When I was even younger, we had

played a similar game where her goal was to grab me and cover my face and neck in percussive kisses before letting me go. As with the kisses, the involuntary goop extraction was oppressive at first, but it also made me feel closer to my mom. Our early physical closeness allowed me to later unselfconsciously wedge onto the couch next to her, where we'd lay together, talking about God, and sex, and how weird it was that we both have a mole behind our left knees. We needed to be close to each other; letting her squeeze my pimples seemed a small price to pay.

I wasn't her only target. When Mom's younger brother stopped by our house in sleeveless shirts, she would beg him to let her pick at the zits on his freckled shoulders, and pose it as a generous offer: "Please can I get this for you?" He would relent and sit so she could stand behind him, her red hair draping onto his so that I couldn't tell whose was whose.

Once, when I was camping once with my aunt and cousins, I called my mom to tattle on her sister. Auntie Kim had refused to pop a huge, unreachable zit on the back of my thigh, which hurt when it rubbed against the canvas of our camping chairs. It was an embarrassing favor to ask of my aunt, made mortifying when she declined. And because I suppose I'd come to associate pimple-popping as an act of love, Kim's refusal to help felt like rejection. I thought,



when I called home, that I would tell the story as a joke, but when I heard my mom's voice, I started to cry. I told my mom, "Auntie Kim doesn't love me." I was twenty-three.

Although my mom didn't give me her freckles or her nearly-always-perfect skin, people say we have identical mannerisms. And I love being asked to pop pimples. I am masterful at it. Calculating the placement of two thumbs or index fingers takes a flair for geometry; urging a pimple to yield requires intimate knowledge of the laws of physics, ruthlessness, and above all, a fearless heart. Finally, I relish the moment of deliverance—a tiny explosion, inaudible as a fish kiss, a microscopic chapstick uncapping, or just one single fizzy bubble bursting over a glass of Diet Coke. It's barbaric and a bit sadistic, but in my family, it's also tender.

The difference between popping someone else's pimples and my own, is pain. Perhaps the most painful place to have a zit is between the upper lip and nostrils—or right inside a nostril. Those at the corners of my mouth take extra days to heal, and burn if I forget about them and order spicy soup. Small cystic pimples congregate monthly on the tender skin right beneath my jaw. Zits near my eyebrows make it hurt to raise them in skepticism. Lately the bridge of my nose sports a touchy red bump, perhaps in protest against my large black-frame

glasses, which I hope make me seem like a woman who prizes looking professional over looking pretty. If I get one on my temple, I swear it'll give me a headache. The problem, of course, with popping pimples, is the risk of scarring.

The first time I noticed my acne scars, I was sixteen, sitting in my parked car with the sunroof open, gazing at myself in my rear-view mirror. I saw the way the light cast tiny shadows under indentations in my cheeks, and I understood with panic that the damage was permanent. I remember it the way I remember the first time I noticed the stretch marks that branched like lightning down the backs of my calves, or the first time I saw the bunching wrinkles around my eyes, days before my twenty-sixth birthday, or noticed a chip in my front tooth, so infinitesimal, multiple people swore they couldn't even see the it, though I paid \$200 to have it filled it anyway.

With each flaw I noticed, my lack of self-awareness stung like a slap. Each realization was followed by sessions of self-scrutiny in front of a mirror. I would climb onto the counter in the bathroom of my parents' house and sit cross-legged with my nose almost against the glass. I wanted to see and catalog all the flaws on my body, the things everyone else saw. It was the dread of checking a bank account that might be overdrawn. At least now I know, I thought.

Once I had taken stock of my face's every imperfection, I began applying foundation liberally. In high school, male classmates would often ask me why I "caked on makeup." I don't remember how I answered, but what I thought was, *Because I know what's under there.* I once got stuck in an angry, circular argument with my classmate Sadie, who insisted that I had acne *because* I wore makeup and not the other way around.

When I learned that popping pimples only made the scarring worse, I thought of all the times my mom held me down and squeezed, and how I'd inherited the compulsion and spent years gouging madly at my face. Recently I was astonished to find that zits heal faster if you do absolutely nothing. Just pretend they're not there. When I told her, my mom was incredulous.

I didn't see a dermatologist until I was eighteen. For my first appointment, the doctor requested I come without makeup so he could examine my skin. I had convinced myself that I was so hideous and horrific without makeup, that on my walk through the parking lot to the clinic, I wept. My mom held my hand and cried because I was crying. For years I saw a kind doctor on the brink of retirement. He insisted that my only course of action was the combo of birth control and antibiotic he'd already prescribed, which had long ago stopped

working. Once when I voiced my frustration, he patted me on the head. My mom and I decided together that he was an out-of-touch idiot. My acne was his fault and we united against him on drives home from those appointments. When I found a new doctor—young and impatient, he gave me a pamphlet about Accutane, which remains the one thing I have not tried.

Accutane (pharmaceutical name: Isotretinoin), was approved by the FDA in 1982, and called “a cure for acne.” Some of the risks on the list of potential side-effects are Crohn’s disease, liver damage, depression, and suicidal thoughts. The list is long. I’ve read it many times. Each time I think, *Maybe*. And then I get to the item that changes my mind: the risk of fatal birth defects if taken by a pregnant woman. I’ve never been pregnant, nor am I trying to become pregnant now, but for me, Accutane’s near-guarantee to kill or maim a fetus spells out the severity of the drug in a real way.

Accutane has always sounded to me like an amalgamation of acute, acupuncture, and butane. Because of the risks, it’s recommended only for “severe” acne. But ask anyone who feels like the acne on their face is a mask, a veil, or an Instagram filter called “Ugly,” and they will say theirs is severe. Ask a twenty-seven-year-old whose acne forgot to magically vanish at the end of her teenage years when she’s on her way

to a job interview, ten-year high school reunion, or first date, and she'll tell you hers is pretty fucking severe. My skin's not bad like it used to be, but I usually have at least one zit somewhere on my face. If I knew for sure that my acne was going to end—for example, maybe on the morning of my thirtieth birthday—it might feel like a storm I can keep weathering.

I have not seen it for myself, but I've read that on the back of a pack of eight Accutane pills, you'll find eight cartoon pictures of pregnant stomachs, with lines drawn through each one, and the words "Do not get pregnant." It seems violent to have to punch each pill through a disembodied pregnant stomach, but the symbols are meant to serve as a warning that transcends language, a last defense. Before a woman can get a prescription for Accutane she has to have two consecutive doctor-administered negative pregnancy tests, and she has to complete an online mandatory distribution program called iPLEDGE, which requires patients to commit to using two methods of contraception. Twice I've gotten as far as this step of the process, and was annoyed to see that even if the patient chooses "abstinence," a second method is still required, which left me wondering: Is the second, seemingly superfluous method supposed to cover the woman if she

finds herself in the midst of a sudden, uncontrollable, lustful act? Or is it required in case she gets raped?

My mom is afraid of this drug. Whenever I mentioned Accutane, she was quick to tell me that my skin was not bad. She didn't even notice my acne when she looked at me. She would say it in a definitive way that seemed to negate my own opinion of my complexion. Although my mom said she didn't notice, whenever I visited home after being away at college for a month or two, she'd pause mid-conversation to comment on how it was looking, "so much better lately!" Her enthusiasm and perfect skin irritated me.

Her unwillingness to endorse my desire to try Accutane has been irksome at best. At worst, it has felt like refusal to help—like the way my aunt declined to pop the pimple on the back of my thigh. My mom's skin is smooth and delicately freckled, and always has been. She tells me I'm beautiful and that my skin's not bad enough to risk damage to my health, but as my mother, her objectivity is questionable

I've often wondered what I'd be willing to trade in order to experience perfect skin. One of my best friends told me about her brother's miserable six months on Accutane, how his skin was sensitive, dry, and chapped *everywhere*. She confided in me that pooping had caused him pain. I read an online account from a pissed-off

teenager whose skin was better every day on Accutane, but her doctor ordered her off it when she started bleeding internally. I've read that many people experience permanent joint pain after one six-month cycle of Accutane. Others found that their nails had weakened or their hair had thinned significantly. But they had perfect skin.

In order to discern if my skin was actually bad enough to warrant a chapped asshole for six months or brittle, flaky fingernails for a lifetime, I returned to the bathroom mirror the try and see myself objectively and from many different angles. I held a small mirror to look at the top of my head—what did my features look like to a tall person? I held the small mirror under my chin and was disturbed by the pointiness of my jaw, covered in red, healing spots. I was astonished by what I saw in the same way humans are surprised to hear the sound of our voices played back for us. *It's so different in my head.*

There's a cognitive disorder where a person cannot recognize familiar faces, even their own. I wonder if these people have to reacquaint themselves with their reflection every day, like I do every few months, to take inventory of my newest scars. Dementia patients can sometimes recognize the faces of other people, but can't remember what their own face looks like. Almost everyone my mom and I know

says that, along with our identical mannerisms, we look exactly alike. Although we both say that the other woman is beautiful, neither of us sees any similarity.

I used to believe that a person had to think she was beautiful to be vain, but now I know that's not true. I have spent hours looking in mirrors and the longer I stared, the more unhappy I became. I stared for so long, my world narrowed to the size of one gaping pore.

I think about how I cried on the way to meet the dermatologist. Or a year after that, when, during a team-building exercise in college, everyone in the group was supposed to share something they struggled with, and I told everyone my biggest struggle was believing I was beautiful, and everyone hugged me. It's startlingly easy for me to be annoyed with this past version of myself, but just last summer I cried on the way to see some high school classmates because my acne had flared up yet again. I am still that girl.

I know Accutane is the last option, and yet, I still resist trying it. There will always be reasons not to, having to do with money and timing and health insurance. But really, I'm afraid. I'm afraid of the risks—that I'll have brittle nails or thin hair, irritable bowel syndrome or joints that ache when I get out of bed.



I'm afraid that, like everything else I have tried, Accutane might not work, and I will have exhausted my last hope.

And I'm afraid that it *will* work, that I will be granted perfect skin, and become arrogant. What if other women resent me for my smooth skin the way I resent my mom for hers?

I've been insisting to myself for longer than I can remember, that a flawless complexion would solve all my problems. But I've come to suspect: that might not be true. I'm afraid that perhaps, even if my acne vanishes the morning I turn thirty years old, I may struggle the rest of my life to feel beautiful. So I think I'll keep mulling, clinging to the comfort that there is still one more cure I haven't tried.

## PROOF THEY WERE THERE

I was thirteen years old before my family moved into the house I consider my childhood home. When my mom gave tours of our new place to visiting relatives, it was a performance. She'd act out the grueling work of removing velvet wallpaper and at the doorway to the small concrete room in the basement, she'd say, "This is for when we get bombed." When the tour arrived at the storage hallway of built-in closets and cupboards and drawers, she showed it off like a game show hostess. Mom's excitement for the first house she'd ever owned was infectious; my sister and I would twirl across her bedroom to demonstrate its vastness.

My mom still talks about the woman who knocked on our door soon after we moved in, who said she'd grown up in our house. In my memory, the woman was in her sixties. She must've been feeling nostalgic that day, to drive out to our house in the country and ask to look around. With a nervous smile, my mom led her on a tour, and she followed, as if our house wasn't the setting for all the woman's childhood memories, as if my mom didn't accidentally, from time to time, still miss the turn onto our long gravel driveway.

I can picture the whole thing, although I'm not actually sure if I rose from the couch to join the tour, or if I have heard the story so many times that I've since mentally tagged along. Either way, I know the woman's smile faded after stepping inside. I know she shook her head slowly and said, over and over, "It just looks so different." The tour—usually an animated circuit through the house—took on the tone of a funeral march. And for my mom, it was an experience so disappointing and strange, it joined the repertoire of stories she tells about that place. I'm not certain, but I think my mom might exaggerate, when she says the woman cried in every room of our house.

When my mom recounted the tour over spaghetti that night, I imagined the rush of memories the woman may have projected onto our walls—walls that, for me, evoked only the smell of drying paint.

The house didn't feel like it belonged to us yet, and neither did our family. My mom had married Chris a month after the move. His last name had just become mine. I'd only recently started calling him Dad and referring to his two little boys as my brothers.

I hadn't yet awakened one Saturday to find everyone embroiled in a kite-constructing competition, sparked by somebody's offhand remark about the strength of the morning wind. My mom and sister were in the dining room taping together straws to serve as their kite frame. They enlisted me to spy on my dad and brothers in the garage, but the boys shooed me away and all I could report was that they'd made a bunch of sawdust. To declare a winner, we went outside and made it a few feet before the wind snapped both kites in half.

We hadn't yet chased our "Welcome Home Dad!" sign when the wind snatched it from my brother, sweeping it across the yard, into the tilled field. After we'd retrieved the sign, we left for the airport and all five of us held it until he came down the escalator still dressed in his army fatigues.

I hadn't yet, while burning garbage on a windy day, set the roof of the red shed ablaze in a dozen tiny fires, and, in a tizzy, first dialed my mom, and then 9-1-1.

We hadn't yet planted 2,000 tiny trees to the south and east of our eleven acres to one day shield us from the wind. I didn't understand yet how that wind-blown place would record the origin of my new family, and come to feel more like home than any other before it.

Like most places, I understood its significance only after I left. Five years ago, a decade after the woman's visit, my parents moved again. I sometimes forget that they no longer live in my childhood home and I wonder who does. If I showed up today, crying, and let whoever lives there now take me on a tour, I bet I would enter their stories about that place. I bet they would remember me and understand: I was there, and it matters that I was there.

My mom has always thought the woman's sadness was tinged with resentment, as if, in altering the backdrop of her childhood memories, we had somehow erased them, or stolen her right to feel ownership. But for me, at thirteen, it seemed that if our house could not be simultaneously hers and ours, she had staked an irrefutable claim. She had the monopoly on our home.

I know her last name was Mischka. Before we even met the woman, I learned to explain where we lived by saying that my family moved to "the old Mischka farm." Sometimes, for good measure, I'd say that our farm was two miles from Tabor, an abandoned little village

which hugs Highway 23 for the length of a couple football fields. Tabor was named after a Czech city, by Czech immigrants to affirm their place in America, and remind them who they were. And now, only a few generations later, it's no longer a town. It's barely even proof they were there.

I still don't know why or when the Mischkas sold their homestead, but in our farming community, home is about heritage, and my childhood home will serve as a monument to the Mischkas until the end of time.

My mom's family has a place like that thirty miles from Tabor. The Holter farm is just North of Oslo, Minnesota and it's been in our family since the 1880s, when my great-grandparents arrived there from Norway. The yard is a long tract of land right on the Red River, surrounded by trees, with two houses on it. There used to be three houses. Before my mom got married, she, my sister, and I were Holters, and we lived there in a trailer, next to my grandma and my uncle Dan.

Back then, the Holter farm was the kind of place people returned to. Whether they were cousins who had played in the yard as kids or who'd just heard stories from their grandparents about the deep curve of the Red River, where our Norwegian blood was once thickest, they were welcome.

Regularly, Holter cousins I'd never even heard of would drive in unannounced while visiting from Texas, or Canada, or an hour away. Sometimes they'd fill plastic bags with apples, and sometimes they'd just walk a circle around the yard with my uncle, pointing at stuff. In the early '90s, when the old barn, empty and rotting for years, had to come down, my family decided to burn it and have a party. I was small, but in my memory, the fire, terrifying in its hugeness, was the backdrop for a reunion, with hundreds of people eating potato salad, and kids clinging to the handmade merry-go-round that always gave me slivers.

I was unfazed by the disappearance of the barn, but I imagine it was troubling for my mom and her siblings; it had been the setting for their funny childhood stories, and their dad's stories before them, about menacing turkeys and spiteful horses. I bet, as they watched it burn and fall into itself that the Holter farm started to feel a little less like home.

The trailer I lived in on the Holter farm is gone now. It was mustard yellow, built in 1960, mouse-ridden and falling apart around us, but no sound will ever make me feel as safe as rain on a tin roof. Shortly after we left, it was sold to some guy who would haul it away

and use it as a hunting shack. I cried the first time I saw the grassless rectangle, like a crime-scene chalk outline, where my home used to be.

Uncle Dan is the last Holter on the farm. He lives in the house he grew up in with my mom and their brothers and sister, but since his wedding a few years ago, they don't invite family out there or answer when people call about stopping by.

I suppose marrying into a place which many people call their childhood home could be overwhelming. For one, my mom feels exiled. Uncle Dan's wife explained to a few of us, one Christmas, that she can't feel like it's her place when people keep showing up as if it's theirs. Her voice became more and more shrill as she spoke, and later my mom muttered in disgust about her sister-in-law.

Perhaps my aunt feels threatened, like my mom did when the woman showed up at our house, as if her identity in a new place can be undone by those who came before. But I don't think identities in a place erase each other. I think they accumulate. So many of my relatives have claimed the Holter farm as theirs I swear I could sense their ownership like ghostly presence during my childhood. When I was alone in the woods, I wondered how old the trees were, and if they'd sprung up or been planted, and which members of my lineage might have purchased the seedlings. I thought about my grandfather, gone



before I was old enough to remember him, who had cleared a trail through the thick trees. To the left of the trail are few rusty, mangled cars, long-ago wrecked and dumped in the woods. Further down the trail, there's a high flimsy-looking platform tacked onto a tree by some daring children of the generation before me. When I would step into the shallow burn pit to light our week of garbage on fire, I heard the clink of blackened Diet Coke cans underfoot, and wondered how long Holters had been burning their garbage here. What kinds of charred, proof of their existence could I find if I began to dig.

And so I understand what it's like to feel as if past generations of your family have accumulated in the grass you walk upon every day, as if they're buried under the driveway instead of the little cemetery down the road. Maybe the woman who came to tour our house, the Mischka woman, was crying for her ancestors too. Maybe she felt her loss of the farm, compounded by history, ran deeper than mine. Maybe it does. But if the identities of her grandparents and great grandparents and cousins she has never met still exist in the ground outside the house where she grew up, doesn't she exist there as well? And don't I get a spot right where the wind broke our kites?

When my parents sold the farm after a decade, they didn't bother with a realtor. They just put an ad in the paper, and the next day made

a deal with a couple who were younger than I was. I've heard that it's changed hands again since then. And yet, people still call it the old Mishka farm. As if my family had never been there.

But I think I left something in that place, some impression of me, like a pin pushed into a map. I wonder if whoever lives on the Mischka farm now sees the hasty patch job on the red shed's roof—blotches of grey shingles over black—and thinks, what the hell happened? I wonder if they watch the shadows of the trees creep across the gravel road and wonder who planted them.

Recently my pastor told a story about the power of places. He met a younger man who had become a Christian while serving in the navy. While they talked, they discovered that they'd worked on the same ship, in the same position, in exact same office. The younger man said he'd felt total peace in that room, where my pastor had prayed daily years before. Perhaps some of the love my new family felt for each other was left over from families before us. Perhaps love doesn't erase itself, but only accumulates.

The summer day we moved out was beautiful and I trekked all over the yard with my camera, snapping the wheat field in motion and the deck my dad built onto the front of the house, where my mom would lounge and read in the mornings. And then I went inside. I stood in

every room of the house. Overcome by the whirring memories in my mind, I took a picture in each. I deleted them later—these pictures of empty rooms. They failed to capture the emotion I'd felt there, and the energy in that place.

About once a year I drive past my childhood home on Highway 23 to get somewhere else, and see that the trees are bushier still. The leaves make it more difficult to see the half-mile to the house, and I'm sure the leaves make it more difficult to view an entire sunrise from the window over the kitchen sink. If I drove down the gravel road and knocked on the door—something I do not feel brave enough to do—I would undoubtedly cry in every room of that house.

What if the proof that we existed is the imprint we leave behind? Not like trees or fires or a new deck, and not even like the piece of closet door-frame my parents removed when we left—the one we stood against, on birthdays, to be measured, until my three younger siblings grew taller than me.

I'm talking about feeling the presence of long-gone relatives in the woods, or the way hallways of a high school seem to buzz even after the students have cleared out, as if the air is soaked with the energy of a thousand kids projecting their ownership. I'm talking about the way some people think Einstein's laws prove the existence of ghosts, that

they are just the energy people leave behind that cannot be destroyed, like two naval officers sharing a spiritual connection in a space, across time. I'm talking about taking photos of empty rooms.

The woman who cried in every room of my childhood home would probably think this was crazy, but what if we loved that farm so ferociously that love seeped into the walls, and reverberates back to whoever lives there now. When I drive by the farm named for her family, I find peace in believing, that even if no one ever remembers we were there, in those walls, we are immortal.

## Bad Christian

My first religious argument with Ramon was about cicadas. That day, Ramon and I, and our eight other co-workers, were in Arkansas, digging holes for blueberry bushes to be planted in. As soon as we broke through the sod, we found the ground dense with sleeping, pupating cicadas. The bugs were huge and motionless, and, caked in mud, they resembled Chihuahua turds. I was digging next to Megan. When we found a cicada, every ten minutes or so, we'd squeal and giggle, and I'd bring down my shovel and squish it with a "hi-ya!" The scene smacked of middle school hysterics, but Megan and I had that effect on each other. And we were having a nice time despite the manual labor our AmeriCorps job called for that day.

Eventually Ramon called over to us from a few holes away, “Can you please stop killing them?” he asked. “It’s really bothering me.” I was embarrassed. I huffed, and shot back that they were only bugs, but after that, I tried to be more careful with my shovel. I thought that was the end of the cicada conversation.

Ramon was three years younger than me—not even twenty-one yet, but he was prone to giving me unsolicited feedback. We all took turns making lunch for the group; when it was my turn, Ramon said my enchilada sauce was a little too sweet. He was from Texas, which may have made him an authority on Mexican food, but his critique of my enchilada sauce made him an asshole. Ramon was Coahuiltecan, descended from native people who had, centuries earlier, been stripped of their culture by Spanish colonists in the missions of San Antonio. I came from a racially and religiously homogenous corner of Minnesota, where the most scandalous thing a person could do was marry a Catholic if you were Lutheran and vice versa.

Ramon and I didn’t always understand each other. In our 15-passenger work van, if the radio dial landed on a Christian station, Ramon would shout, “turn that shit off!” I would fume in silence. I would never have spoken out against his spirituality, however bug-

loving it might have been. It seemed like it was socially acceptable for him to disparage mine.

Later, in front of our whole team, Ramon brought the cicadas back up. He asked me, “You believe that God created all living things, right?” I said I did. He responded, “Then why do you think some lives are less important than others?”

He had already made me feel shitty for killing bugs that, I realized, were just trying to metamorphosize in peace, but now, was he saying my insecticide was equivalent to murdering people? I wanted to scream. I was being lectured on the sacredness of nature by someone who’d never recycled a pop can in his life. I must’ve replied with something dumb and angry before I stormed away to call my mom and vent about Ramon, the self-righteous idiot.

When it comes to religious debate, “dumb and angry” about sums up my style. Until college I’d never met people who challenged my beliefs or poked holes in what I’d been told in Sunday school. For whatever reason, the challengers were usually the men I was dating. We would be driving around at night and innocuous conversations about the universe would morph into interrogations about God. Since I was the one who believed, the burden of proof was on me. They’d ask me about the Bible—why God let the devil torture Job, or why God

nearly made Abraham kill his own son, or if a little girl in Africa had never heard about Jesus, if she died would she burn in hell forever, or if someone murdered and raped your sister, could he presumably be forgiven and end up your neighbor in heaven for eternity? I didn't know the answers. I may never know answers to these questions, but boys demanded that I defend God. When I couldn't (I never could), I cried in frustration.

I think I struggle to express my faith partly because it's inexpressible. It's a feeling, which doesn't do much to advance my argument for the existence of God. For me, being a Christian means crying in church. Without fail, when I'm singing a slow refrain on Sunday morning, watching the blue stage lights twinkle with the beat, I am overwhelmed by emotion—overwhelmed with joy, overwhelmed with regret about times I wallowed in self-despair or followed the impulse to be shitty to my friends that week. And then I let go of feeling bad; I let go of feeling self-conscious. Tears stream down to my neck, too many to wipe away. I belt the song's harmony, and, if I'm really into the song, I'll reach one arm up as far as my shoulder socket will allow. When the song ends, the lights come up and I know my catharsis has left mascara trails down my cheeks, but I don't care. After the service, my friends gather around me and I tell them the



worst things happening in my life and they tell me everything's going to be okay. I hug a dozen people and practically bounce to my car in the church parking lot, determined to be kinder. My church is my community. Everywhere else, I feel like the odd man out.

When I mention to people that I believe in God, I think of the unexplainable joy of crying in church. I'm continually learning that the association isn't exactly universal. In my car, the first and second radio preset buttons play Christian music. I toggle between them exclusively until the moment right before someone gets in my car for the first time. At that point I switch to a third station: *today's top hits*. My mom does it too. She listens to Christian music but kills the volume while she's in the McDonald's drive-through. It's not that she and I are afraid to mention our faith. I just think playing songs about Jesus's blood for a new colleague or the girl handing you a medium mocha frappe feels a little too intimate. Like baring your deepest longings on a first date, it's scary. And it could be interpreted by some passengers, like Ramon, as hostile.

My roommate recently said that certain Christian language makes her excluded. Specific words turn her off. I have sensed her animosity before and was surprised to hear her discussing it. I knew

that churchy people had their own vernacular, and that I probably employed the vocab from time to time without knowing it.

I asked her, “Like which words?”

She said that some words felt like code words. “Like *Gospel*,” she said. “I have no idea what it means.” I agreed that gospel was a blurry one, and sometimes I didn’t know what it meant either.

She went on, “Or *Providence*. *Lord*, or *Christ*.” After a beat she added, “or *he* and *him*—when they’re capitalized.”

I dropped my jaw. I raised the pitch of my voice, and asked her with exaggerated shock, “*He* and *Him*? Pronouns? Pronouns make you angry?” I was fake-yelling, hoping to accomplish a teasing, jokey tone. Luckily she laughed with me. She said that those words, when she saw or heard them, provoked anger because they made her feel alienated, like they belonged to a club she was not a part of.

My co-worker Steph identifies as queer. She harbors deep antagonism toward Christianity and has legitimate reasons: When she came out to her parents at eighteen, a decade ago, they disowned her and she was homeless for a while. She told me recently her theory, that Christianity is the root of intolerance. “Christians are the problem,” she said. Her sentiment landed like a gigantic bird on a windshield. I don’t

remember what I said in response—probably something dumb and angry.

Steph and I misstepped a bit at the beginning of our friendship. Soon after we met, a mutual acquaintance wrongly informed her that I was homophobic. Whether the woman lied on purpose or by accident, we can only speculate. Months later, we were at a bar when we discovered the misinformation. We shouted at each other over the music, about how we had both been extra sweet to the other during those months. She'd been trying to convince me that gay people were alright; I'd been trying to convince her the same about Christians.

People make assumptions about me based on my faith. They assume that I've never questioned what I believe. They assume I'm homophobic. They assume I'm Republican. If I tell someone I'm celibate, they assume it's because I think sex is dirty and bodies are shameful.

I worry that my preferred car music might bump me out of the realm of socially acceptable Christianity into a more precarious group—the kind rife with religious nuts and bigots. I used to imagine that these were the people who had ruined God for everyone else. They were the villains behind the crusades and the witch hunts and the signs proclaiming “God hates fags.” I believed the issue was uncomplicated:

There were good Christians and bad Christians. The people who lumped us all together, who made me feel like a worm for calling myself a Christian, were just misinformed.

A few months ago, Steph and another co-worker were sitting across from me at my desk, chatting while I typed away. I didn't notice how it happened, but the conversation had turned to God. They were sharing their criticisms of Christianity. I don't remember the topic, or any of the particulars, except that I piped up to offer a redemptive perspective. Maybe they didn't ask for my opinion, but they were sitting at my desk.

My co-workers listened for a moment and then shut me down, and continued talking to each other. I turned to face my computer screen. Just like so many other times among my social circles, my faith was looked upon with disdain; there was clearly no room for my viewpoint in the conversation.

Eventually Steph said, "Holly, you seem mad."

"Not mad," I said, "just discouraged." I felt as if I was always the only one with a positive outlook on Christianity. It was always an unpopular outlook, always disregarded. And standing up for my faith under those circumstances was scary. I said that sometimes I felt "oppressed."

The room's mood shifted instantly. Steph said, "I'm sorry, but you are not oppressed." She spoke to me about the long, dark history of systematic oppression by the Church. She told me a story of a time when two grown men beat her up in New York City. They said, "You want to be a boy? We'll treat you like one." And they left her laying on the sidewalk. While she told the story, at times she was calm, at times she was trembling with fury; at times she had tears in their eyes, at times I did too.

But I said surely Christianity isn't to blame—Christianity is hope and love. I said "I would never treat people that way. None of my Christian friends would treat people that way."

I heard myself say those words, and suddenly understood something difficult about my religion, because someone else had said those same words to me in a totally separate context.

At the same time Steph and I were becoming friends, she had an argument with the guy I was dating—Tim. Their argument was about gender, not religion, and occurred because he'd held a door open for her. He didn't understand her objection, and told me all about it as we sat on his yellow couch together. He was rubbing my feet, but as he became

more and more worked up, he kept stopping in order to gesture. He was raised on chivalry. He said, “Holding doors is just what you do.”

Feminism and sexism came up often in conversation among our friends, and every time Tim chimed in, usually a few rounds of one-dollar beers deep, he would inevitably say something wrong and end up feeling like an asshole. Tim was specifically frustrated because he considered himself to be decently self-aware. Being from the South, he could speak more articulately about racism than any of our friends. He wanted to understand sexism too, he said.

I’d never even taken Women’s Studies 101 but I’d read enough feminist blogs to feel equipped. I took a whack at explaining the basic tenets. I hadn’t been speaking for more than a minute when I mentioned rape culture, a concept of feminist theory that saturated social media at the time. Tim stopped me. He said, while he was in college, he’d been forced to attend a campus talk about date rape. “And she stood up there and told us not to rape,” he said. “It was insulting.”

I understood, and I told him so. Not all guys are shitty, but all women have had shitty experiences with guys, which I held up as proof that more education is needed on topics like date rape.

Tim looked at me with skepticism. He seemed to think I was exaggerating; he was becoming defensive. I took a breath and resorted

to the strongest evidence I had—vulnerability and truth. I told him that, a year ago, at a bar, I ran into a guy I recognized from high school.

I'd never spoken to this guy before but over my third Bud Light, our banter sparkled, and we kissed for a long time next to bright neon beer signs and guys playing darts. The following weekend, I let him take me bowling, which turned out to be boozey bowling, and afterward, at his house, our clothes began coming off. The urgency felt good, but I was celibate—a decision I'd based on my faith—and I set my boundary: "We are not going to have sex," I told him. I said "No" many times that night, but it happened anyway. It wasn't rape. It wasn't consensual. I don't know what it was, but afterward, when I said I wanted to go home, he wrapped his arms tight around me and we fell asleep. Hours later as the sun rose I climbed the stairs from his basement bedroom, even though he was me begging me to stay just a little longer, even though he had his arms still cinched around my waist. I dragged that man up each step like a heavy suitcase, and at the door I peeled his fingers off me one by one. Later I told this guy that he coerced me to have sex with him. He was silent. I reminded him that I had said no many times, and it wasn't okay. He eventually said, "But sometimes no mean yes." So pained was his expression that I began to

feel guilty for being the messenger, for making a cliché out of him. I told him, “No does not mean yes.”

At the end of the story, I was crying. The overhead light in Tim’s living room was suddenly too bright, and he seemed to be sitting very far away from me. The first thing he said was that better communication is the key; I should have been more clear about not wanting to have sex.

I told Tim that most women have a story like mine and often, much worse. Then Tim told me that he has plenty of close female friends, and if they had stories like mine, he would know about it.

He told me he thought it was despicable to have sex with a girl, when she doesn’t want to. He said, “I would never do that. None of my friends would ever do that.”

A few months later, when I said, “I would never do that,” to Steph, I flashed back to this day on Tim’s yellow couch and I became him. I had also looked at someone in tears and insisted, “I am not the problem, and furthermore, maybe there’s no problem at all.” She’d been right—denying the existence of a problem does make someone part of the problem.



I learned about my own privilege that day. Sometimes I understand it like this: Since Christian forces have always acted upon America, I am the default. I belong to a privileged group. Rationally, I am on board with that. But if my position is one of privilege, why am I often made to feel small for choosing my faith? Sometimes when I'm confused and mad, all I can do is remember the moment I heard myself speak Tim's words, and focus my gaze into the deep empathy that moment carved into my consciousness.

People are complex. Just like a man isn't good or bad, Christians aren't good or bad. A pastor I respect once said, "The problem with the church is that it's made of people, and people suck." Most of us can tell a story about being hurt by the Church. I once confronted a pastor about how the sermons he preached sounded misogynist, and he told me over the phone that he could not meet with me because he does not meet with women. When I think of the Church that inflicts pain, I picture a medieval cathedral and the gypsy-hating bad guy from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. I think of an institution that sold expedited passes out of purgatory and masqueraded conquerors as missionaries. The Bible defines the Church as the people who choose to love God and love their neighbors as best as they can. For me, it's the overwhelming

emotion that rushes through me on Sunday mornings. The Church is all of these things, the good and the bad.

I don't know what I'd say to Ramon now. Perhaps I'd sound just as dumb and angry as I did in Arkansas. I know I'd ask God to forgive me for thinking Ramon should crawl into the mud and sleep for seventeen years like cicadas do. And then I would try and look straight at Ramon's anti-Christian feelings and understand, that they are valid and more complicated than I am capable of knowing.

## Failure to Connect

If my mom finds herself in a conversation about regrets, she will talk about the woman at the airport. I've heard her tell the story many times.

Years ago, before flying required the removal of shoes, my mom was smoking outside an airport, chatting to another smoking woman. My mom asked, "Are you traveling to visit family?"

The woman said, "No, I don't have anyone." And she started to cry.

I am sure that my mom attempted to comfort the woman, but she doesn't remember what she said. She only remembers what she wished she had said: *You do have someone. You are so loved.* My mom says

that was too chicken to say anything blanketly spiritual at the risk of offending a stranger.

And the first few times I heard about the woman at the airport, I didn't get it. I thought it was odd that my mom, who always spoke to the people bagging our groceries, who encouraged me to befriend my classmate with the speech impediment, didn't say what she wanted to say.

When I was twenty-two I realized the childlike faith I'd been given by my mom had become threadbare while I wasn't looking. I was trying to figure out how to regain traction with God and develop a grownup faith, especially without having to sacrifice anything fun.

One Friday, I was leaving my job as a university customer relations specialist, so stressed and angry with my boss that the arrival of the weekend hadn't even registered. I said a quick, silent prayer:

*Help me.*

A few minutes later, I passed a short man with red facial hair on the sidewalk who appeared to be shaking ever so slightly. He said, with his arms already open, "Hi, I'm Lance, can I give you a hug?" It could have been creepy, but there was so something so sincere and innocent about the man, I leaned in and put my arms around him for a moment. I said thank you and kept walking and I cannot explain it, but I felt my

body fill with energy and the anger drain out of me. Driving while crying should probably be illegal. Especially that day—I was weeping uncontrollably and probably endangered a few of my future fellow motorists.

After Lance, I started to think that faith in God isn't always built on breakthroughs of understanding or revelatory signs from heaven. In my case, it's made up of tiny moments of connection.

Last summer, five years after hugging Lance, I finally understood my mom's woman-at-the-airport story. Now, when I find myself in a conversation about regrets, I think of the couple with the RV.

I had stopped at a gas station in Montana, halfway through a sixteen-hour drive home to see my family. I was dizzy with an excess of solitude, and my ass was still numb as I walked back to my car. I spotted a couple on the other side of my pump, leaning against the huge RV they were gassing up, looking as dazed as I felt, a terrier drinking from a bowl at their feet.

It was almost like I heard a voice saying, "Go talk to them." But that's not the right language for this; there was no voice and I didn't *hear* anything. Or, it was almost like I felt a magnet pulling me toward them, toward a potential moment of connection, but that sounds a bit too woo-woo. Just as there is no language, there's no explanation. The

instinct that once asked me to lean into a hug from a red-bearded stranger, now asked me to gamble bigger and I was mortified.

Beyond *hi*, what the hell would I say? *Cute dog*. Or *Looks like a vacation!* Or *God told me to introduce myself*. I'd been driving alone for so long, did I even remember how to make conversation with people? I decided that the voice wasn't real, the magnet wasn't a thing, and I should just get in my car and eat my candy like a normal person. And I drove away, the solitude wearing heavier than before.

When I think about the couple with RV, first I question my sanity. *Why are you thinking about them?* Then I relive that moment of missed connection, the disappointment of it, and God feels as real as that day Lance hugged me.

And then I marvel that even though I heard the voice and blew it off, even though I resisted the pull, even though maybe I failed to potentially help a couple of total strangers and their dog experience something as divine as I know a tiny moment of connection to be, I still got to.

## Fourteen Bible Verses about Donkeys

The ring was a Christmas gift from Daniel—a stainless steel band that he'd had engraved with my favorite bible verse: Jeremiah 29:11, which begins, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord." We hadn't been dating that long, yet he'd accepted a job in Minnesota, where I lived, and moved from California to be closer to me. His relocation rated at the top of the list of most romantic things ever done for me.

The ring didn't signify anything, but it was the first ring of any kind I'd ever been given by a boyfriend, so it seemed momentous anyway.

And the verse he'd picked, about God's good plans for the future, he had placed directly onto my finger. I would look at my hand, think of future rings, and hanker for bigger plans.

Seven months later, I made him squeeze my ring onto his left hand before we entered the largest porn shop in Indiana. We were homeward bound after a road trip. We'd passed a hundred miles of billboard advertising for the place, and sped the final thirty, and now that we were in the parking lot of a huge windowless building just off the interstate, I was embarrassed and I knew it was ridiculous, but I wouldn't go in unless he pretended we were married.

He may have hesitated for the briefest moment, when I handed him the ring. Perhaps he sensed, as I did, that my reasons had to do with being Christian and ashamed. But he didn't ask me to explain. He didn't engage me in a familiar clash of his logic and my faith. Daniel had bought me the ring for the same reason he attended church with me most Sundays—to make me happy. Not because he believed or understood or ever stopped asking me to make sense of things that I couldn't.

He wanted to know why believing in God precluded the possibility of extraterrestrials.



He often asked about inconsistencies between the angry God of the Old Testament and the kinder, gentler New Testament God.

He took one of the free Bibles my church gave away, and after leafing through it for a while, he opened to the index and asked me, “Why are there fourteen bible verses about donkeys?”

When we weren’t singing karaoke, or committing egregious PDA at the mall, or a park, or a movie theater, we were arguing. Most Sundays, I would glance at Daniel throughout the sermon, wondering if he was hearing the same thing I was hearing, wanting to elbow him and ask, “Are you saved yet?” But our post-church conversations usually morphed in fights, the kind that ended with me screaming at him: “Why can't you just accept the fucking miracle?”

We first noticed the billboards for the largest porn shop in Indiana when we were halfway through the day’s nine-hour drive home from Cincinnati. We’d been there visiting friends for Fourth of July, a couple, who would break up shortly after us. We had eaten homemade pizza on the floor in their apartment and watched fireworks together in the rain. It was one of those vacations that make you believe, that when you return to reality, everything will be different and better.

He stifled a sigh, put on my ring, took my hand, and as we walked into the largest porn shop in Indiana, I felt, for just a moment,

like I had won. But even then, as he was wearing the words of my faith on his hand, which he had selected and purchased for me, I saw that he had never wanted to believe them. I saw that the fraud of pretending to be married, was really no different than the fraud of thinking that someday, we might be.

## Stuck: A Story of Perfectionism

Six years ago, I was a college senior with one night remaining to write a semester's worth of essays on early British literature. I had procrastinated this work so effectively and for so long, with a level of generosity from the professor that could only be called outrageous, that my window for completing it had shrunk to just one more night. It was a familiar scenario—one I'd arrived at partly due to laziness and low self-accountability, and partly, because the standard I had set for myself was perfection.

I told myself at the beginning of the night that I just needed to hack my way through a few five-page essays. They didn't have to be perfect, just finished. And then I told myself I would start right after I illegally downloaded and watched the critically-acclaimed film from 1995 called *Kids*, about a thirteen-year-old sociopath with HIV who jaunts around New York City infecting virgin girls even younger than he. The movie is bleak. Called, by some, a social commentary, it portrays a youth culture obsessed with getting stoned, getting laid, and beating strangers senseless—all in the sole pursuit of pleasure.

As the sky lightened a few shades into the first hint of sunrise through my bedroom blinds, the film ended. I felt dirty. I stared at the credits on my laptop screen and could no longer inhale all the way, as if a huge wad of gum had lodged in one of my lungs upon the sudden realization that time was up. I had wasted it all. I crawled onto my futon bed, and passed out, knowing I would wake to a failing grade and have to repeat a semester of Old English epic poetry.

Perfectionism is a beautiful answer to the “what’s your biggest weakness” job interview question, because it’s one of those “this doesn’t really sound like a problem” weaknesses. But I know, when I give that answer, that there are two types of perfectionists: adaptive and maladaptive. I am, unfortunately, the second.

For perfectionists, there are only two possible outcomes: perfection or failure—this is known as black-and-white thinking. Nothing exists between the extremes. Anything less than perfect is failing.

For maladaptive perfectionists, often the anxiety is too big. The pressure is unmanageable, and the inability to cope with the stress of unreachable goals, means turning to procrastination and other methods of self-sabotage.

Some people expect flawlessness of their relationships or demand it of their bodies. I only require perfection of myself when I'm performing somehow—academically, professionally, culinarily (which is why I don't cook for people), etc. In these areas, perfectionism is both my personal code of honor and my most glaring flaw—it is my highest aspiration and my largest stumbling block.

Teachers first identified me as a perfectionist in fifth grade when I failed art. I never finished an art project. I would still be cutting out leaves, paper Christmas tree ornaments, or the buckles for my leprechaun's shoes by the time my classmates were hanging their finished projects from the ceiling of our classroom. Their work was complete but mine was meticulous. Maybe they had a finished product, but I had my dignity and moral superiority. When teachers mentioned

my perfectionism in front of other students, they meant it as a criticism, but I received it as a compliment and blushed with pride.

There were no real consequences for my perfectionism until I was an English major in college. After sabotaging myself into many failed classes, I had to tack an extra semester of time and debt onto my degree. With each new failure, I had more difficulty believing that I was smart—how could those things be true at the same time?

Perfectionism is a thought pattern and thought patterns are hard to break. I may feel helpless much of the time, but I'm not powerless, and I'm not a victim. I may struggle with setting excessively high standards, but each day I create my circumstances and seek solutions. Which is why I like therapy so much.

One counselor I saw for free in college told me I was arrogant to believe I could write a perfect essay. Why was I even in school if I had nothing to learn from my professors? Another counselor listened for a while and then looked deep into my eyes and said, "Holly, just *do* it."

My mom tells this story of a time when she almost drowned in two feet of water. She was seventeen, walking alone on a beach in Mexico, when she waded into the ocean and was knocked off her feet by the powerful undertow, and sucked beneath the water again and again. She flailed, exhausting herself and swallowing seawater, until a heroic

Mexican man plucked her out of the current and helped her find her swimsuit top. Before he showed up, as she struggled to get her feet under her, she may have been thinking, along with any witnesses to the rescue, *This should not be this hard.*

I struggle with things that other people manage just fine. I assume those people are watching me flail. And if they are watching, I wonder if they share my disgust or bewilderment. I wonder if we're all thinking in unison: *Holly, this should not be this hard.*

When I tell my friends about the terror of procrastination, they often try to soothe my anxiety with platitudes like, "You'll get it done. You always do."

I want to insist, *No, I don't.* I think of the night I watched *Kids*. I consider my extra semester of college and my intimate knowledge of failure. As much as I ache to make people understand me, disagreeing with someone who's offering me encouragement would feel ungrateful and strange.

Years ago I read online that I might be addicted to the panic that accompanies extreme procrastination, and I felt ill. I'm not oblivious to the fact that I require the pressure of a quickly looming deadline to accomplish almost anything, but what if the stress isn't purely utilitarian? What if I secretly get off on it? My decision, two years ago,

to apply to grad school mystifies me to this day. The only reason I finished my bachelor's degree was my mother, who stood over me, yelling, "keep typing!" as I sobbed at her kitchen table. Does returning to academia makes me a masochist? Or maybe some sort of sad adrenaline junkie? Even worse, is the possibility that, if I'm addicted to anything, it's to the drama—the constant state of not being okay, of requiring pity, reassurance, attention.

If I am actively avoiding being productive, I am wallowing. This means I have gone at least one day past the max number of days a person should go without showering. I have said to heck with self-care, because clearly I don't deserve it. I'm a greasy, melodramatic hermit, binging on episodes of American Horror Story and peanut butter on stale tortillas—the last two food items left in my kitchen. I know what I'm doing; I'm trying to make myself feel as physically and emotionally wretched as possible so that I will have a real reason for not working.

Here's the most grotesque part: wallowing also feels kind of good, in that same way that holding a grudge can feel good, or engaging in a hot, nasty affair might, or leaving anonymous sexist comments on an article about paleo carrot cake.



The fact that self-sabotage is satisfying on any level, fascinates me. Maybe, when I can't accomplish perfection in some task, at least I'm able to take pride in my failure.

Sometimes I think self-sabotage is a response of rebellion. Perhaps I'm rebelling against my own ridiculous goals, or against my grandma who told me, as I slumped over the piano at twelve years old, that I had to practice until the song was perfect, and start over every time flubbed a note. Or maybe I'm rebelling against my mom, who would point to a B and ask, "What happened here?" Rebellion may be childish but it's also kind of empowering. Rebelling is a way to have agency.

Before I moved to Washington for graduate school, I sought counseling to help me deal with my anxiety. I told her I was afraid that I wouldn't handle the emotions of the transition perfectly, as if one hiccup in packing or driving across the country would mean I'd been wrong to believe I could manage grad school. My counselor, a young woman named Sam, pointed to my love of writing and asked, "If your move went perfectly, would that make a good story?"

I conceded. No, I said, I suppose if something went wrong, the story would be better for it. Actually, without conflict, it couldn't even be a story. Perfectionism is a non-story.

If my norm is failure, the opposite of perfection, that's not a much better story. But as someone who loves a dramatic account of events, I share tales of my self-sabotage abundantly. In some cases I reveal those darkest parts of me in order to forge human connection. Other times, I whore out my struggles to get attention or to be more likeable. I learned in high school that perfection rarely wins you friends. Regardless of the motivation for telling my maladaptive story, it's the same story every time.

Kind of like the first computer game I remember playing, *Lemmings*, named for the little overall-clad fellows who would march onto the screen and, if I didn't build bridges fast enough, would splat to their deaths like bugs to a zapper. They had no agency and theirs was the path of least resistance. Self-sabotage is my easy way out. Perfectionism is the story I tell myself about who I am and what I'm capable of, so I don't have to ask the hard questions like, "Could I have succeeded if I had really tried?"

And knowing that it's just a story I tell myself should change everything.

Among the things I carry in my purse, my favorite is Wite-Out. Not the white goop of the past that dries into a bumpy scab, but Office Depot's paper-white, 4.2 millimeter-wide "correction tape." I wield the

Wite-Out thoughtfully over my planner. Where there used to be a meeting I skipped, a fellowship application deadline I missed, or countless to-do items that I never got done, I press and push that delicate tape across the offending blight, and I'm delighted to see that the page is perfect once again; it appears as if nothing ever happened.

## The Call of the Void

My three friends and I had progressed up Pinnacle Mountain all morning. We had gone silent early on, contemplating the perfect morning weather and the best places to step. We had scrambled over boulders, looking like ants on gravel. We had, after many tries, successfully taken a self-timed photo of ourselves hanging from a branch that reached low over the trail. When we got to the peak and surveyed what seemed to be all of Arkansas, I looked out into the expanse, and I wanted to jump.

Being from a particularly flat part of the Midwest, I had never climbed to the top of anything before, so the instinct to hurl myself to

my death in the treeline far below, was new and terrifying. My hands went tingly. My leg muscles twitched. My mind was spinning as I imagined leaping off the edge over and over, knowing at the same time, that I had no intention of ending such a pleasant hike by dying. Dizzy, I sat down on a rock and focused on not speaking my feelings out loud, lest my friends try to restrain me at the top of a mountain or have me committed when we got back to the car.

I chocked the feeling up to phobia—a fear of heights I didn’t know I’d had. But later learned that more than thirty percent of people have experienced the instinct to jump from high places, or what researchers at Florida State University are calling “high place phenomenon.” The French have an expression for this impulse. They call it *L’appel du vide*, the call of the void.

If you’ve never experienced it, the call of the void feels sort of like the distinct urge to laugh at a funeral, or to stand up and shout something ridiculous in a full, hushed auditorium. It feels like you’re playing a game of chicken against everything that is good and decent.

Edgar Allen Poe’s short story, “The Imp of the Perverse,” explores that human itch to do exactly the wrong thing in a given situation. He sets the scene for his theory by saying, “We stand upon the brink of a precipice. We peer into the abyss—we grow sick and dizzy.” Poe has

pushed us all to the very edge of Pinnacle Mountain. He forces us to look into the void, past the initial shock, past the point where I would have sat down.

Poe goes on, describing the instinct to jump. He says, “It is but a thought, although a fearful one, and one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror.” His choice to omit commas between the qualifiers causes them to tumble too quickly to be understood until after the period. Poe accumulates short phrases to create a breathless sound. Their driving rhythm is like a pounding heartbeat.

Poe has been picking up steam to the end of the passage, in which he forces the reader to consider falling. Poe writes, “And this fall—this rushing annihilation—for the very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination—for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it.”

Poe’s philosophy about the call of the void seems to be this: We want to jump precisely because the idea of jumping is so repulsive.

One Friday night last fall, when I’d gotten more stoned than I had meant to, my friend Kate was about to drive us to the taco truck

downtown. Before we left, she said I was allowed to sit in the front passenger seat of her car, if, and only if, I promised not to grab and yank the steering wheel and kill us both. Her condition was so silly that I laughed, with my whole belly, for a long time before I promised and got in the car next to her. Once we began moving, I could not stop imagining the behavior she'd expressly forbidden. The idea of yanking the wheel was so bizarre and frankly, exciting, that I started to giggle, which made Kate start giggling. I was especially glad I hadn't killed us when we ate our tacos in her car, talking for a long time, perhaps bonded somehow by a shared near-death experience.

Perhaps Poe is right and the call of the void is a sinister call, a whispered enticement of the devil, seducing us toward destruction. Or perhaps being in a high place allows a person to feel closer to God. Or to feel like a God, immortal—able to conquer and fill up the void by jumping in.

Looking into the void can change a person, according to some astronauts, who have reported experiencing epiphany when they viewed Earth as an isolated planet, hanging in space. The sensation is called the Overview Effect. Edgar Mitchell, the sixth man on the moon, described the sensation this way in an interview for a 2007 documentary: "Suddenly I realized that the molecules of my body and

the molecules of the spacecraft and the molecules in the bodies of my partners were prototyped and manufactured in some ancient generation of stars. And that was an overwhelming sense of oneness, of connectedness. It wasn't them and us, it was 'That's me. That's all of it. It's one thing.'"

Maybe looking out at all of Arkansas, or gazing down at the earth as a pale blue dot can cause a person to recognize their smallness, and be disturbed by it. And in this way, maybe the desire to jump is not a whispered coaxing or the fierceness of the delight of horror. Perhaps it's a conversation, a rebellious response to the void's bullying call of, *See how insignificant you are?*

It feels right that the French, whom I imagine to be deeply existential and brooding people, would get poetic about this. For me, the call of the void brings to mind an echo—shout your name into a canyon and hear it call back to you. Maybe we're drawn to the edge, not to jump, but to contemplate jumping and to feel, like a jolt, the urge to live in response.

The researchers at Florida State University found that high place phenomenon has nothing to do with suicidal thoughts. They theorized that it happens because some signals inside the body travel faster than others. On a mountaintop, fear is experienced by the brain and



transmitted to the body first. Hands tingle; leg muscles twitch. An instant later, thoughts kick in, and misinterpret the body's fear response as *Why am I thinking about jumping? Do I want to jump?* Some have speculated that perhaps the instinct to jump from high places is an evolutionary safety feature. People stay further away from a dangerous ledge if their fear is twofold: fear of falling, and a fear of jumping too. On pinnacle Mountain, my fear of death is what compelled me to imagine it, recoil, and sit down on a rock. Florida State researchers titled their study, "The urge to jump affirms the urge to live."

Like most phobias, the fear is inevitable. If I am up high with no barrier, I know I will feel pulled to the edge and called to leap off of it. Whenever I can, I climb mountains anyway, so I can sweat and take self-timed photos with friends, to feel the adrenaline pump, and understand my smallness, and misjudge my hugeness, to feel for a moment like I might die, and to decide not to jump—to look out over the dizzying expanse of the void, and laugh.

## The Marrying Kind

Under my bed I keep a shoebox full of Valentine's Day cards, notes, and love letters from my mom. Maybe twice a year, loneliness or nostalgia compels me to look through its contents.

Recently I found a receipt. On the back of it, my college roommate, Jenny, scribbled something I said to her about my brand-new boyfriend, Rex: "I think I'm going to marry this boy." As soon as I said it, she wrote it on a receipt and handed it to me with a flourish, believing, as I did, that it was a momentous proclamation. But Rex and I broke up a year later and I would go on to say the same thing about many far less likely candidates. I have yet to be right.

Recently, it was the manager at the AT&T store. Because I was his only customer I told Matt the long version of how, the day before, I lost my phone on an ill-advised five-hour hike with a guy I met I online.

Matt helped me file an insurance claim and we chatted about our siblings and places we'd traveled. As I was leaving an hour later, he said, "Come back if you have any questions, or, if you just want to tell me about your summer," which I found particularly romantic because I wasn't wearing any makeup.

I got home and told my roommate that I was going to marry that AT&T guy. I knew almost nothing about Matt, but I was so charmed by the story of how we met, I wanted to tell it over and over. The next week I went back, expecting Matt to ask me out. Instead he waved hello, a different flirty salesman rang up the charger I didn't need, and the guy from the hike found my phone in his pickup.

In a journal I kept when I moved far away for the first time at age twenty-three, I wrote about my intention to marry a bearded stranger I met in Target. He overheard me crying to a salesperson because they didn't carry the adaptor I needed to get online and Skype with my mom. Shortly after, in the checkout line, the bearded stranger approached me with his phone to his ear. He said, "Best Buy didn't have it either, but now I'm on hold with Radio Shack." I never got his name but his epic generosity helped to soothe my homesick heart.

I thought I was supposed to marry a co-worker at a garden center because on my first day of work he taught me about shrubs and trees

for hours, touching their leaves so tenderly. He had been a reading tutor at the same elementary school I had worked at a year prior, which I took to be a sign. When we became Facebook friends, I learned that he and his girlfriend ran an organic farm.

Once, I saw my handsome neighbor carrying what I thought might be a Bible on a Sunday morning, and for me, that was enough to trigger the thought: “Maybe *he’s* the one.” A few months later I met him and his girlfriend Mary and found out they were anarchists.

Admittedly, I have a tendency to speak in superlatives. I exaggerate. I pronounce things as serious as “He’s the one” all the time. In our yearbook, my high school class of forty people voted me “Drama Queen.” And at the time, I thought it had to do with my lead role in the play that year.

Being from a tiny rural Minnesota town means that your parents were probably high school sweethearts. Mine weren’t, although my mom and Chris—the man I call Dad—did go out one time in high school. Seventeen years later, when Chris was divorced and I was fourteen, he finally called to ask my Mom for a second date. After a month they were engaged. My mom’s love story taught me to keep an eye out for guys I already know, even the ones who seem to be the unlikeliest of possibilities.

Last fall, while I was living in Washington, I met a man who lived in Montana. He was from a North Dakota town, so rural and tiny, that he was amazed I had even heard of it. We discovered we'd gone to colleges a few blocks away from each other, worked for the same school district at the same time, occasionally even in the same building. He had even been a Bible camp counselor with my first cousin. I called her and she told me what I already knew: I should marry him. On our second date we had an irreconcilable disagreement about God and that was the end.

My closest friends have learned to become skeptical. If they used to quote me on the backs of receipts, now when I announce my plans to marry the man I sat next to on a plane, or the barista who remembers me because I have the same name as his sister, my news is met with eye rolls. I don't mind; the amused laughter of my closest friends doesn't feel like ridicule, it makes me feel known, loved even.

Five years ago I met a woman named Ruth Anne in church, she introduced herself after we'd sung the final song of the service and told me she had the ability to *see* a person's future spouse. She said, "You've been lonely, but he's praying for you, and you're going to meet him *soon*." I still don't know if I think she's crazy or divinely gifted, and I'm

not sure how the hell to interpret “soon,” but since that day, I’ve been on high alert.

Two Christmases ago, my connecting flight home was cancelled and I was stuck in Denver. The airline shuttled a group of us to a nearby hotel at one in the morning, and in line to check in, I chatted with a young blond guy who attended Moody Bible College and worked at a movie theater in my city. I was exhausted, but it didn’t take long for me to be convinced he was the one. I didn’t get his name, but every time I go to the movies, I look for him.

For me, believing in God means that seemingly insignificant moments can have power, that chance meetings, totally accidental connections between strangers, can change everything for the better.

At first, I held onto the receipt because I thought it was funny. I was a small-town idiot, and Jenny was silly for thinking we’d started a paper trail of proof that I’d found the one. But now when I look at the receipt, I recognize that even though I’ve been disappointed a hundred times, I’m still seeking, still open, and unashamed of the hope that something inexplicably good is about to happen.

## THESIS BOOK LIST

Unspeakable by Meghan Daum

The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion

Nickel and Dimed by Barbara Ehrenreich

I Feel Bad About My Neck by Nora Ephron

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by Anne Fadiman

Another Bullshit Night in Suck City by Nick Flynn

Thrown by Kerry Howley

Traveling Mercies by Anne Lamott

An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination by Elizabeth McCracken

Ongoingness by Sarah Manguso

The Argonauts by Maggie Nelson

Dear Mr. You by Mary-Louise Parker

This is the Story of a Happy Marriage by Ann Patchett

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls

Moments of Being by Virginia Woolf

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